Narrative Analysis of Wellbeing and Social Inclusion Consultations

Consultation held January 2023

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# Statement on Language

In this report the terms “people/persons with disabilities” and “disabled people” are used interchangeably. Many people within the disability rights movement in Ireland recognise the term ‘disabled people’ because it is considered to acknowledge the fact that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society and so aligns with the social and human rights model of disability. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “people/persons with disabilities”. This also reflects the language used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We also acknowledge that some people do not identify with either term.

For further information on disability-related language and terminology, please refer to the NDA’s Advice Paper on Disability Language and Terminology.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Overview

During 2022 the National Disability Authority (NDA) conducted a national survey on [Wellbeing and Social Inclusion](https://nda.ie/publications/hows-it-going-national-survey) with much of the analysis focusing on a comparison between people with and without disabilities and people with disabilities to a great and to some extent. The launch of the Wellbeing and Social Inclusion survey findings on 31 January 2023 was followed by a consultation hosted jointly by the NDA and the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). The attendees were asked to discuss three main topics;

* what can we do to improve the social inclusion and wellbeing of people with disabilities,
* how do we reduce negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and tackle discrimination, and
* how do we monitor these actions?

The intention of the consultation was to capture the views of various stakeholders including people with different forms of disabilities, carers of people with disabilities, family members, and representatives from Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) on the issues of wellbeing and social inclusion. The information gathered from the consultation will feed into a United Nationals Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Implementation Strategy that is to be developed during 2023.

Consultations were conducted in person and online. Seven consultation groups were formed (three in person and four online) and discussion was facilitated by staff members of the NDA and DCEDIY. In total, including supporters, 56 people participated. The majority of participants had a disability.

Narrative analysis has been applied to the data collected during the consultations and six key narratives have emerged which are discussed briefly below. The narratives are:

* the inaccessibility of services for persons with a disability
* social inclusion of disabled people
* disability awareness and self-advocacy;
* employment and education;
* participative Government and policies governance
* monitoring progress on inclusion.

Each narrative is discussed briefly below.

Representatives from two DPO groups took part in the consultation. DPO members reminded the facilitators of the importance of Article 4(3) of the UNCRPD, namely to consult with and actively involve disabled people through their representative organisations in decision making processes relevant to disabled people. The input from DPOs was largely similar to that of other participants but is disaggregated under the thematic headings set out below where relevant. Other comments from DPOs were similar to other participants and are therefore not separately distinguished but are covered in the narrative areas below.

# Narratives

## Inaccessibility of Services for Persons with Disabilities

Throughout the consultation discussions the inaccessibility of services was one of the most prominent narratives that emerged. The participants discussed wanting to take the ‘fight’ out of getting supports. Of particular note was the over-reliance on the medical model when assessing individuals for supports within the Department of Social Protection (DSP). While discussing the DSP many participants voiced their frustration at the lack of a streamlined communication channel between the DSP and GPs, which often resulted in claimants being sent back between the department, their GP, and consultants multiple times before an assessment of need took place.

Inaccessibility was also discussed in a much broader sense. Many participants focused on the fact that society, at all levels, from transport to building layout, can be inaccessible to them. Some participants reported that lack of accessibility discourages them from participating fully, which in turn isolates them. Some reported that this isolation then contributes to or triggers mental health problems. One participant stated that people with disabilities should be hired to consult on the construction of buildings. It was suggested that people who use wheelchairs should be consulted on bathroom size and accessibility, to ensure they meet the needs of people with disabilities. This would ensure that accessibility was properly addressed instead of it being a tick box exercise for planners.

However, it was not just the physical aspects of society that were deemed to be inaccessible by many of the participants, language was also discussed. The use of jargon in everyday life was seen as a barrier particularly to participation with an intellectual disability. Many deemed it to be intimidating, thus preventing people from engaging with consultations and other meetings/committees that directly affect them and would benefit from their input.

## Social Inclusion of Disabled People

Mainstreaming people with disabilities (i.e. not segregating them from mainstream schools, universities, communities etc.) at every level of society, with a particular focus on people with an intellectual disability, also featured in the discussions. Participants pointed out that people with an intellectual disability need to mix with more than just their own families and other people with intellectual disabilities. It was also stated by some participants that children with an intellectual disability should not be removed from mainstream classrooms, as their inclusion serves the dual purpose of familiarising children from a young age with disability and knitting children with an intellectual disability directly into the general fabric of school life.

Representation was noted as being key to advancing the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. One of the participants suggested that there should be advertisement campaigns that show people with a variety of disabilities taking part in a wide range of activities in order to prove to the public, and to other people with disabilities, that anything can be achievable. Representation was also discussed in the context of including individuals who still reside within institutional settings in consultations, as many participants felt people living in these settings were often forgotten about and overlooked.

Many of the participants discussed the lack of people with disabilities among public representatives at all levels of government, with a particular focus on TDs. A representative from a DPO felt that it was the responsibility of the government to facilitate persons with disabilities to become public representatives. The participants considered that the needs of people with disabilities will continue to be overlooked unless there are more public representatives with lived experience of a disability. The discussions focused in particular on facilitating persons with an intellectual disability to become TDs and local representatives.

However, some participants felt that social inclusion often has an impairment specific focus, which does not reflect genuine inclusion, with too much of an emphasis on the individual’s disability rather than being recognized as a person first. Participants in one consultation discussed the possibility of developing a Universal Design approach for Social Inclusion, much in the same way Universal Design currently focuses on the physical aspects of inclusion and accessibility. This design would focus on how to mainstream every aspect of a person’s life, from education and employment, to social wellbeing and community engagement.

## Disability Awareness

Participants also discussed the issue of mandatory disability awareness training. One of the representatives from a DPO said that they could deliver training to workplaces and to schools if there was political will to make it happen. Participants suggested that this training might point out how many people acquire a disability in the course of their life versus those who are born with one. The training would also highlight that people with disabilities do not lead confined lives but can participate fully in society as long as it is made accessible for them. The participants noted that this would go a long way towards changing the attitudes of the general public towards disability, while also bringing issues of accessibility and inclusion to the forefront of their minds.

## Employment and Education

Many of the participants felt that the current disability employment strategy[[2]](#footnote-2) is not being rolled out effectively and that its aims are too weak. They also felt that the number of people with a disability in employment is not being recorded correctly, although details on why they felt this way were not captured during the discussions. One participant stated that they felt no employment strategy can be administered properly without the correct figures.

Some participants felt that the education system relies on the medical model rather than the social model of disability. They linked this back to a lack of inclusion of children with an intellectual disability in the mainstream classroom, which they considered to be inappropriate and exclusionary. They voiced the need for a system that makes whatever adaptations necessary to be inclusive. Participants from one group discussed the importance of pushing for all people with disabilities to have an education on a par with the general public, rather than being removed from mainstream school in order to accommodate their medical needs.

## Participative Government and Policies

Some participants felt that the systematic design of local and central government is exclusionary in nature. Some felt, for example, that the range of committees, consultations, and other engagement structures could actually serve to distance people with disabilities from key government decision makers. A member of a DPO felt that consultations and committees were just ‘tick box’ exercises for many government departments, in order to make it look like people with disabilities were consulted during the process, with the feedback being rarely taken on board and acted upon. This member also discussed how many consultation processes take place after the major decisions have been made, rendering the exercise pointless, and thus not prioritising the inputs from DPOs.

Participants from one consultation group brought up the idea of ‘disability proofing’ policies. They stated that many policies are poverty and equality proofed, but very rarely are they disability proofed, unless the policy refers directly to people with disabilities.

## Monitoring Progress on Inclusion

When participants were asked how we could monitor progress on inclusion the EU charter of Fundamental Rights was discussed. Participants felt that a rights based approach, mirroring that of the EU charter, would generate responsibilities amongst government departments when developing disability policy. It was considered that any policy that is designed in this way should also emulate the language enshrined in the UNCRPD. It was suggested that any indicator that is created to monitor progress should also monitor the positives and negatives so as give a full picture.

There was some discussion around DPO’s in this regard also. One representative from a DPO felt that DPO’s would be instrumental in monitoring attitudinal changes towards people with disabilities over time and the government should invest more funds in supporting their endeavours, as DPO’s are the only representative organisation of persons with a disability in Ireland.

Some participants felt that there was too much of a focus on quantitative research, which fails to capture the true lived experiences of people with disabilities. Many participants seemed to agree that there was a need for a more qualitative approach to disability research, or at least research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods.

1. National Disability Authority, 2022a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015). Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/18906/1120bc6ad254489db9571c74e8572f44.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)